

The Milner Trail

Route to Riches



Old Florence, date unknown
Ace Barton Photograph.



New Florence in 1898.
Ace Barton Photograph.

By Cindy L. Schacher,
Archaeological Technician
Nez Perce National Forest

The Milner Trail *Route to Riches*

The Milner Trail

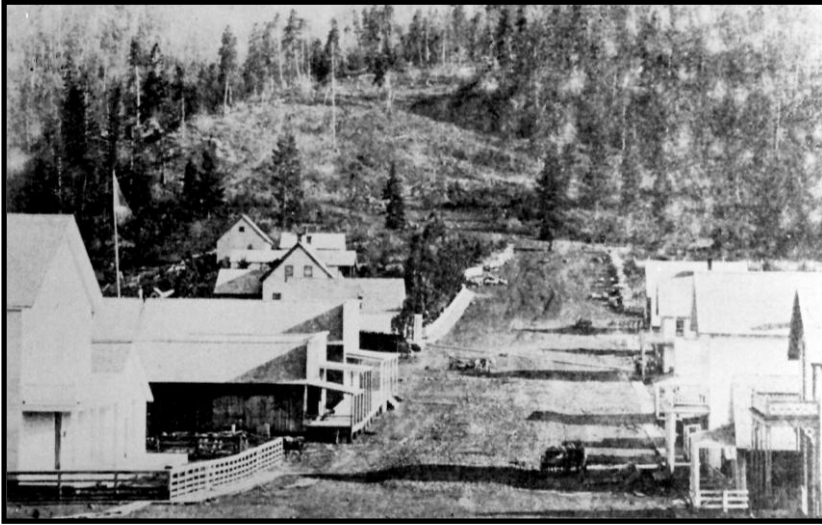
The Milner Trail was built in 1862 by Moses E. Milner, one of fifty-two men who had discovered gold in Elk City, Idaho the previous summer. Milner was born in Standford, Kentucky on May 8, 1829 and during his lifetime he traveled widely. He trapped in Missouri and Wyoming, was a pioneer in Oregon, mined in California, Idaho, Montana, and later served in the U.S. Army. In the fall of 1861 he built a log cabin at the foot of Mount Idaho and in the spring of 1862 began construction on the trail which would come to bear his name. When the trail opened in May or June of 1862, easing transportation and increasing the amount of supplies in Florence, prices of provisions in the remote mining community dropped. The trail went from Mount Idaho south along a hogback to the Adams Way Station and on into Florence, avoiding the great elevation changes of White Bird Hill and the high ridge above Florence. Milner's stay in north-central Idaho was brief and after being badly wounded by a mountain lion in 1862, he sold his trail and moved to Virginia City, Montana (McKay 1998:309).



Loyal P. Brown's Way Station in Mount Idaho, date unknown. It was later used as the Idaho County Courthouse.

Photograph courtesy of the Idaho County Centennial Committee.

According to Sister Alfreda Elsensohn's book, *Pioneer Days In Idaho County, Volume One*—In its beginnings, Mount Idaho was one of several way stations along the trail to the Florence mines. Mose Milner, known to the world at large as California Joe was the real father of the town for he built its first dwelling, a log cabin. It was of the type known as a double cabin, a story and half high and with an addition or two. This structure later served the town for many years as a hotel. According to Loyal P. Brown, Milner, with the help of his partner, Francis, cut the pack trail from Mount Idaho to Florence in the spring of 1862. The name Tollgate still clings to a place six or seven miles above Mount Idaho as a reminder of Milner's pioneer efforts (Elsensohn 1947:106).

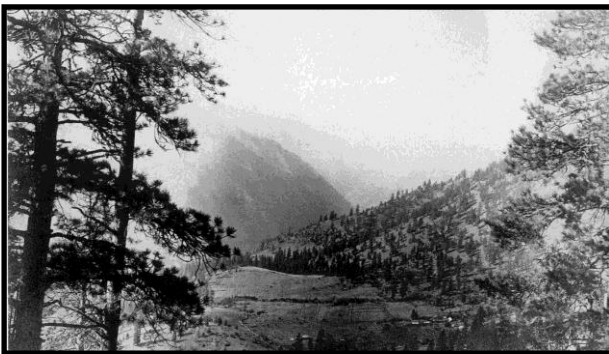


As soon as the Milner trail opened, hundreds – even thousands – of people and pack animals walked its tread. It took two or three days to go from Mount Idaho to Florence. Empty pack trains had to yield the right-of-way and give the inside of the trail to loaded trains.

Mount Idaho in 1880. Photograph courtesy Idaho County Centennial Committee.

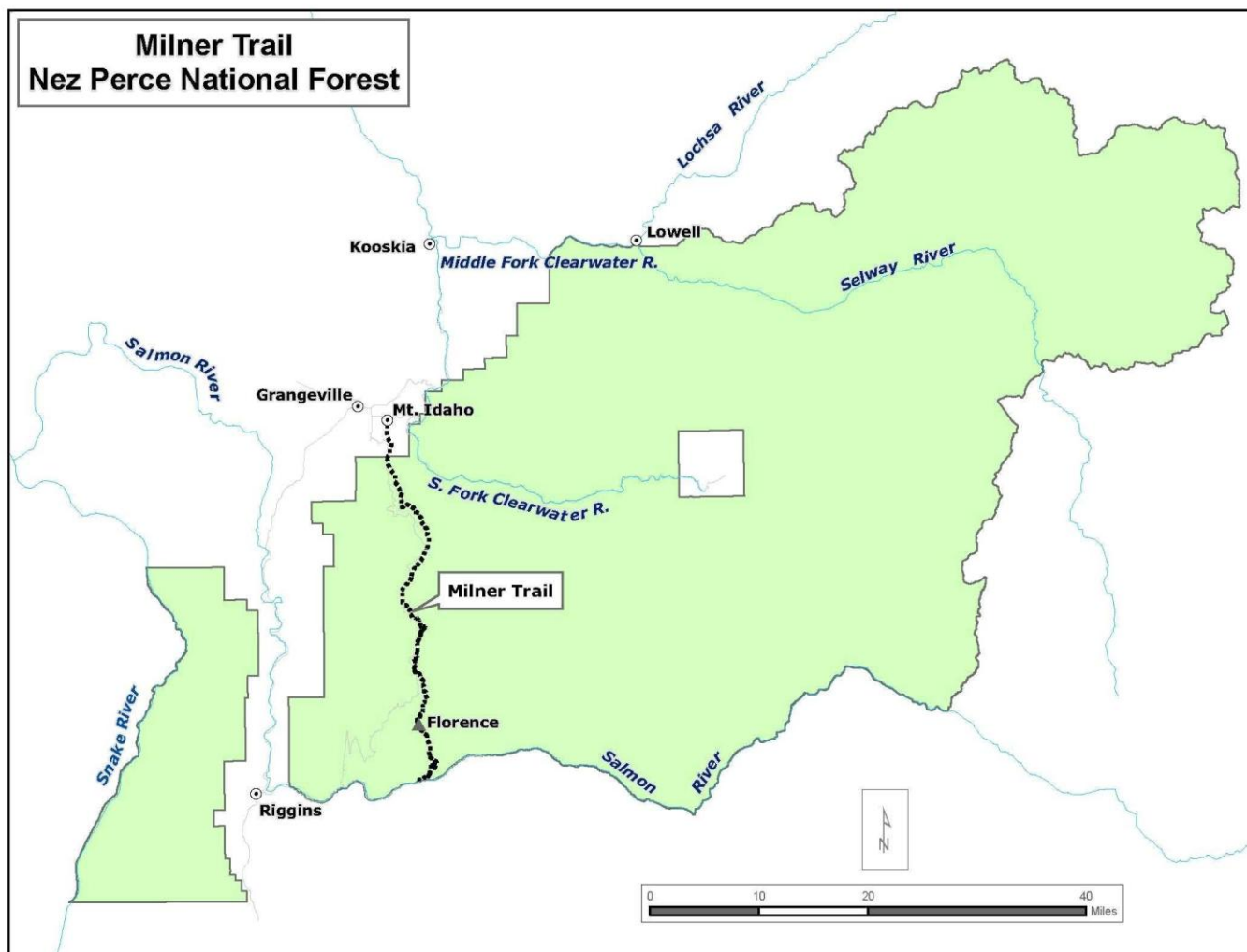
One of the early parties of travelers included Seth and Jane Jones. The latter was the first white woman to travel the trail and Milner allowed the entire party to travel without paying the toll. They arrived in Florence on June 1, 1862. The couple later settled on the Camas Prairie where they farmed and ranched. After gold was discovered in Warren in the summer of 1862, the Milner trail was extended from Florence down to the Salmon River, past Marshall Lake and in to Warren. The Milner trail between Mount Idaho and Florence was authorized in 1864 by the territorial legislature as a toll trail, with charges of \$3 per wagon and horse or mule, \$1 per horseman, and 50 cents per loaded pack animal (McKay 1998:312). According to the Idaho County Commissioner Minutes, on July 1, 1872, the entire trail lying in Idaho County known as the Mose Milner trail between Florence and L.P. Brown's (at Mount Idaho) was declared a county trail.

The Scott Ranch lies along the route of the Milner Trail. It was originally settled by James Gay and D. Saltry in 1861. Soon after, W.B. Knott took over the homestead. He farmed and ran a ferry at the river near the mouth of the warm springs. Sam Large remembers Mr. Knott selling potatoes to the Florence miners at 75 cents a pound. That was with the clay on them and when they were washed, half was taken off in dirt. They were so small that they became famous to every old-timer as Knott's Pills. W.B. Knott is buried in an unmarked grave alongside the trail to his ferry. Sylvester Scott bought the



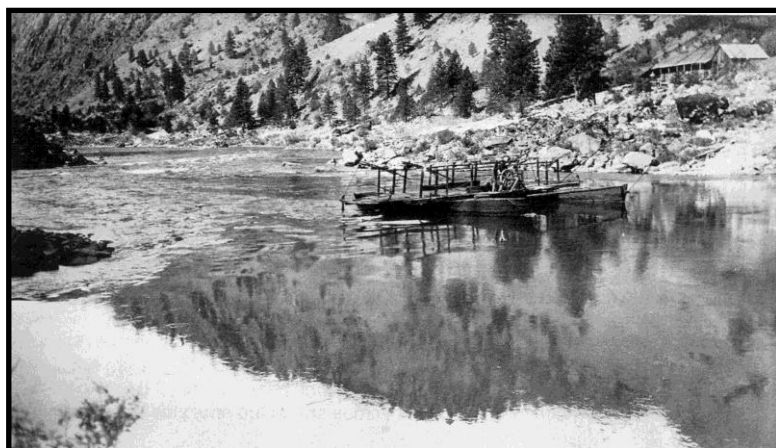
place in 1894 and moved there with his family from Scott Valley, east of Cascade. The Scott's had 21 children. They raised cattle and produce for the mines. With Chinese help, they put in an irrigation ditch to bring water from Robbins Creek. When Sylvester died, he was buried on the ranch. His son, Reuben, lived there until his death (Carrey and Conley 1978:237).

The Scott Ranch, 1907. Rodney Glisan photograph.



State Wagon Road

For many years miners in the Florence area spoke of the need for a wagon road to bring in freight to the area and to connect the northern and southern parts of Idaho territory. At that time, most of the wagon roads in Idaho County ended at Mount Idaho. In 1890 the territorial legislature appropriated \$50,000 for a State Wagon Road that would connect Mount Idaho with the southern counties by going through Florence, past the Knott Ranch,



Ferry at French Creek on the Salmon River.
Rodney Gilson photograph

across the Salmon River at the mouth of French Creek, and on to Burgdorf Hot Springs, Warren, and Little Salmon Meadows. The construction of the wagon road into Florence in 1890-91 was a major factor in the lode prospecting and mining boom of the late 1890's. The route followed the old Milner trail except for the grade down the north fork of Slate Creek, which was improved, and according to the 1890 survey the distance from Mount Idaho to Florence was 36.25 miles and from Florence to French Creek 9.75 miles. The road was completed by September 1891 (McKay 1998:313). The state bridge was built across the river at French Creek in 1892 (construction was delayed a year because the iron for the bridge was mistakenly sent to Spokane). For nine years the bridge served wagon traffic on the state wagon road connecting Little Salmon Meadows and Mount Idaho (McKay 1998:319).

During the 1890's lode-mining boom, the newspapers carried reports of the condition of the trail/road in to Florence. At times money was raised by subscription to cut out the downfall and repair the road, when the work was too much for the supervisor of the road district. One woman went to Florence on horseback in the summer of 1892 and was so exhausted by the trip that she had to be carried the last six miles (McKay 1998:314).

A bicyclist who traveled the Milner trail in 1897 reported that there were three way stations offering food and sleeping quarters between Mount



White Bird Station, date unknown.

Photograph courtesy of Don and Esther Morrow.

Idaho and Florence and no other services or dwellings along the way (it took him thirteen hours to make the trip by bike on the rough trail). One roadhouse that operated until 1906 was known as Dead Horse Camp (earlier referred to as Midway). It was four miles north of Adams Camp and boasted a tavern, hotel, barn and small store. In 1922, travelers usually spent the first night on the trail at White Bird Station or Dead Horse Camp, and the second night at Boulder Creek or at dry camp between Boulder and Little Boulder called "Starve-Out Camp". Adams Camp was operating then as well (McKay 1998:315).



Adams Camp Way Station, date unknown.

USFS photograph.

Moses E. Milner (California Joe)

Moses Embree Milner was a colorful character of the old west. Milner, also known as California Joe, whose frontier reputation as an Indian fighter, scout, guide and rifle shot, won him the respect of his fellow plainsmen, army officers, and indeed almost everybody



with whom he came in contact (Milner and Forrest 1987:1). He ranked with such men as Kit Carson, Wild Bill Hickok, Buffalo Bill Cody, Captain Jack Crawford, the North brothers, Billy Comstock, Jack Corbin, and Charley Reynolds (Milner and Forrest 1987:13). He hunted, trailed, fought, ate, and slept with such men as General Custer and Buffalo Bill, and was the friend and contemporary of Jim Bridger, Jim Baker, Jim Beckwourth, Kit Carson, Alex Majors, Wild Bill Hickok, Charles Utter, and dozens more of the same type (Milner and Forrest 1987:26).

Moses Embree Milner
Circa 1874-1876

Photograph courtesy of the Kansas State Historical Society.

Milner was born in a log cabin on his father's plantation near Stanford, Kentucky on May 8, 1829, the oldest of a family of four children (Milner and Forrest 1987:30). At the age of fourteen he quit school, shouldered his Kentucky rifle and headed for the wilderness. The young wanderer reached St. Louis where he joined a party of trappers on their way to Independence, then only a trading post, to outfit themselves for a hunting trip on the Platte and its tributaries. He was the youngest of the party of twelve. In 1844 Milner traveled to Fort Laramie where he entered the service of the American Fur Company as a trapper. A few days after his arrival at the Fort he joined Jim Baker and a party of twenty-five trappers bound for the Yellowstone River and its tributaries to trade with friendly Indians and act as an escort for the trappers from that region who would soon be on their way back to Fort Laramie. It was during this trip that fifteen year old Milner took part in his first Indian battle and killed three Blackfeet warriors camped on the Powder River (Milner and Forrest 1987:37).

Milner's stay at Fort Laramie lasted almost three years when he and five other trappers went to Fort Bridger, located on the Black Fork of the Green River, Wyoming (Milner and Forrest 1987:38). At Fort Bridger young Milner entered the service of Jim Bridger, proprietor. He was employed as a livestock herder (Milner and Forrest 1987:43). In 1846, during the Mexican War, Milner was appointed by Colonel Doniphan as a guide for the famous Doniphan expedition (Milner and Forrest 1987:59).

At the age of twenty-one, on May 8, 1850 Moses Milner married thirteen year old Nancy Emma Watts. The day following their marriage the couple headed to the California gold fields. The Milner's joined a wagon train and because of his past experiences, Mose was elected to captain the slow-moving, cumbersome prairie schooners (Milner and Forrest 1978:78). They arrived in the Sacramento valley in November of 1850. Milner left his young bride and traveled to the gold camps on the American, Yuba, and Feather Rivers. Milner heard about the wonderful fertile land of Oregon and in early spring 1852 he and his young wife set out for Oregon, reaching Corvallis on April of 1852. Milner soon filed a claim on three hundred and twenty five acres. He also purchased three hundred and twenty acres adjoining his homestead. He built a cabin and bought the best blooded cattle and horses that could be purchased on the west coast in those days. Despite the success of his ranching endeavors, Milner soon grew restless and returned to the frontier life. He returned home occasionally and fathered four children (Milner and Forrest 1987:82).

In his travels Milner met then Lieutenant Philip H. Sheridan, fresh from West Point at Fisher's Landing, a post located a few miles above Fort Vancouver. Lieutenant Sheridan gave Milner the contract for supplying the post with wood and in this way the two became well acquainted (Milner and Forrest 1987:89).

With news of rich gold strikes in eastern Washington and northern Idaho in 1859 Milner set out for the new gold fields. At Walla Walla he sold his pack train, kept his Kentucky mare, and set out for the Salmon River diggings. Several miles from Grangeville, Idaho he filed a claim located on the main trail. In the fall of 1859 he built the first log cabin on the site of a camp which he named Mount Idaho. The next spring he constructed a toll road three miles long, which shortened the distance to the mines by several miles. This proved to be a profitable venture. He charged one dollar each for all persons or horses that traveled the cut-off. He also built a large addition to his cabin, and then opened a tavern, serving meals to travelers at one dollar each (Milner and Forrest 1987:94).

One day in early fall of 1860, a half-breed riding a broken-down buckskin pony stopped at Mount Idaho. The stranger's horse was placed in the log stable beside Milner's Kentucky mare. The next morning the half-breed went out to feed his horse before breakfast saying he would pay his bill when he returned. This was a custom of the country and Mose thought nothing of it. A few moments later an employee of Milner's, Earnest Allen, came running to the cabin with news that the half-breed had just ridden away on the Kentucky mare. Milner grabbed his rifle and went in pursuit of the thief. Mose took a short-cut to the trail the half-breed had taken and concealed himself at the side of the trail—waiting. Shortly the thief appeared. Milner took a careful rest and sent a bullet crashing through his brain. Mose caught his prized mare, walked over to the man lying on the ground and wrote the following: Warning to horse thieves, Mose Milner, Mt. Idaho (Milner and Forrest 1987:96). In 1861 Mose was seriously injured by a cougar and by the spring of 1862 he had regained his strength. In the summer of 1862 he left Mt. Idaho for the gold fields at Virginia City, Montana (Milner and Forrest 1987:100). It was here that he received his nickname, California Joe, a name that stuck with him till his death (Milner and Forrest 1987:107).

California Joe's travels took him to Fort Lyon, Colorado where he was employed by Major E. W. Wynkoop, as post scout and Indian interpreter. He was present at the Sand Creek Massacre on November 29, 1864, a day in which he never saw a more savage or wild band of men than those at Sand Creek that day (Milner and Forrest 1987:135).

From Fort Lyon California Joe traveled to Fort Union, New Mexico where he met famous scout and Indian fighter, Kit Carson. Carson hired Joe as a civilian scout for an expedition from Fort Union to establish an army post at either Cedar Bluffs or Cold Spring on the Cimarron route of the Santa Fe Trail. The two became warm friends and Carson is quoted as saying that he never knew a better Indian fighter, or a braver man than California Joe. The only battle in which California Joe took part under Carson was the fight at Adobe Walls in the Texas Panhandle (Milner and Forrest 1987:140).

In the fall of 1866 California Joe found his way to Fort Riley, Kansas. General Hancock established Fort Harker shortly after Joe's arrival in Kansas, and he engaged the frontiersman as a scout for the Fifteenth Infantry. Joe served as civilian scout for troops operating against hostile Indians in Kansas, Indian Territory, and Texas. The next spring he joined General Alfred Sully at Fort Dodge. It was at Newton, Kansas, then a trail-end cow town, that California Joe first met James B. Hickok, or better known as Wild Bill (Milner and Forrest 1987:155).

Later in 1868 General George Armstrong Custer promoted California Joe to chief of scouts for the Washita campaign, but promptly demoted him when celebrated by getting drunk and causing pandemonium. The pair remained friends, corresponding infrequently until Joe's death. In February 1870, Joe further enhanced his alcoholic reputation when he caused some inconvenience to his old friend, General Phil Sheridan, whom he had known since the 1850's when Little Phil had soldiered in Oregon. Joe got hopelessly drunk at Fort Arbuckle and was incapable of guiding Sheridan to Camp Wichita. Sheridan lost a day while Joe sobered up, and a still gloriously tipsy Joe was bundled into a wagon for the return trip. Sheridan was angered but awed, both by Joe's ability to find liquor and by his massive consumption (Milner and Forrest 1987:3).

In 1876 General George Crook employed Milner as a scout and interpreter for the Big Horn Expedition in the Big Horn Mountain country of Wyoming (Milner and Forrest 1987:261). Following the Big Horn Expedition California Joe was engaged as a scout by Colonel Ranald S. Mackenzie who was in charge of a winter campaign against the Cheyenne's under Chief Dull Knife. This winter campaign was known as the Powder River Expedition (Milner and Forrest 1987:272).

California Joe's life ended in Fort Robinson, Nebraska when following a brief confrontation in the sutler's store at Fort Robinson on October 29, 1876, Tom Newcomb and California Joe pulled their pistols. Joe persuaded Newcomb to put up his darn gun and have a drink. Onlookers thought the feud to be over, but later Newcomb appeared with a Winchester rifle and shot Joe in the back as he stood talking to friends (Milner and Forrest 1987:10).

References Cited

Carrey, Johnny and Cort Conley

1978 *River of No Return*. Backeddy Books, Cambridge, Idaho.

Elsensohn, Sister M. Alfreda

1947 *Pioneer Days in Idaho County, Volume One*. Caxton Printers, Ltd., Caldwell, Idaho.

Elsensohn, Sister M. Alfreda

1951 *Pioneer Days in Idaho County, Volume Two*. Caxton Printers, Ltd., Caldwell, Idaho.

Glisan, Lawrence Rodney

1907 *Journal of a Trip to the Mines, Idaho County, Idaho*. Manuscript on file at the Nez Perce National Forest Supervisor's Office, Grangeville, Idaho.

Idaho County Commissioner Minutes, Idaho County 1869-1887. Manuscript on file at the Nez Perce National Forest Headquarters' Office in Grangeville, Idaho.

McKay, Kathryn L. McKay

1998 *Gold for the Taking: Historical Overview of the Florence Mining District, Idaho Count, Idaho*. Manuscript on file at the Nez Perce National Forest Headquarters' Office in Grangeville, Idaho.

Milner, Joe E. and Earle R. Forrest

1987 *California Joe, Noted Scout and Indian Fighter*. University of Nebraska Press, Lincoln and London.